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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YAOUNDE 000741

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KCOR](#) [PHUM](#) [CM](#)
SUBJECT: WHILE NOT PRETTY, CAMEROON'S ELECTION PREP IS
MOVING AHEAD

Classified By: Poloff Tad Brown for 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[¶1.](#) (C) With less than fifty days before voters go to the polls on July 22, the Government of Cameroon's handling of critical elements of the pre-election period has been marred with procedural irregularities. Some observers are questioning the government's commitment to democratic reform, pointing to a series of questionable presidential decrees, the continued use of government assets for ruling CPDM party politicking, and flawed registration efforts (and an incredibly complex process) fraught with hurdles for prospective voters. Accordingly, the newly-computerized voter roll is likely to fall short of pre-election goals, while perhaps still representing an increase over the 2004 registration figure. The Supreme Court is currently hearing challenges based on these shortcomings. While the elections will be far from perfect, with cleaned and computerized voter rolls, growing election fever and rejection of many incumbents in the primaries, they should represent a step forward for Cameroon's nascent democracy. End summary.

Registration: Falling Down Before the Start

[¶2.](#) (C) The Government of Cameroon (GRC) was criticized after the 2004 elections that brought Biya into his final -- according to the current constitution -- seven-year term, but those elections were widely believed to represent the electorate's preference for Biya over a large slate of challengers. The Commonwealth, in a team headed by former Canadian Prime Minister Joe Clark, pushed aggressively afterwards for the establishment of a new, independent electoral body to free Cameroon from elections run by the Interior Ministry (MINTAD). In the end, the GRC passed legislation calling for a new agency, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), but not in time for the Parliamentary and municipal elections slated for July 22. The Commonwealth perceives the delay as GRC foot-dragging and, perhaps as a result, is unlikely to dispatch any observers.

[¶3.](#) (U) A primary thrust of post-2004 criticism was the need to clean the electoral rolls and expand the number of registered voters; from 4.6 million in 2004, there was hope to expand the base to perhaps seven million this year. Here, too, the GRC's efforts have been disparaged as half-hearted

or, worse, intentionally ineffective in order to enhance prospects for the ruling CPDM party, whose constituent base is well established. Cameroonian law allows prospective voters to register year-round, but many of the national government's delegates at the local level (who carry out registration) claimed they were awaiting instructions from the capital before opening registration. This delay was due in part to MINTAD efforts to complete computerization of the existing voter rolls first, another project borne of the 2004 criticisms. Even then, an aspiring voter faced a daunting set of obstacles, including the requirement to register in the presence of a roving commission whose schedule was unknown.

¶4. (U) Embassy employees and contacts who tried to register in Yaounde and Douala reported persistent difficulties and frequent instances of apparent tribal discrimination. Reports from the hinterlands, however, where ethnic homogeneity is the norm, were almost universally more positive. Nonetheless, with a largely dispersed, poor, illiterate, and generally apathetic population, even a more ambitious and well-planned registration effort would have faced shortcomings. Some observers claimed that the GRC made no meaningful push to attract new registrants, although MINTAD ran daily announcements in multiple newspapers warning that, under Cameroonian law, registration would close once elections were called -- an unprecedented action that responded to demands from diplomats for a more pro-active GRC role in promoting registration. Biya also waited until the latest date permissible under Cameroonian law to call the elections, thus maximizing the time for registration to occur. Faced with calls from certain quarters (but not from diplomats, who remained studiously silent on this question) to extend the period of registration beyond the legally required closing of the rolls triggered by the call of

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elections, Biya said he was legally bound to close registration. Clearly apathy was a serious problem among potential registrants, and indeed it is not clear that many more would have registered if given additional time.

¶5. (SBU) With UNDP assistance and its own funding, MINTAD computerized the existing voter rolls and is now in the process of adding new registrants and scrubbing the old voter lists for duplications, deceased voters, and fraud. At a May 31 donor meeting, an expert attached to MINTAD predicted that roughly one in five entries in the electoral rolls would be stricken as a duplicate entry. This leaves open the possibility that the voter list for 2007 could even be smaller than in 2004, a potential political embarrassment for Biya. However, both MINTAD Minister Marafa and the Prime Minister have told the Ambassador in confidence that they expect the final number to be close to 5.5 million; if it comes to pass, this would represent a modest improvement over past elections.

Gerrymandering After the Elections Are Called

¶6. (C) In a Decree released five days after the formal convocation of the electorate, the Presidency unilaterally announced a restructuring of national constituencies. Opposition parties, civil society activists and even some CPDM officials decried the action as illegal and transparently designed to increase the CPDM's advantage. The Catholic Church and the League for Equality of Women and Children (LEFE, a previous recipient of USG Democracy and Human Rights funding) have challenged the decision in court. In private conversations, Interior Minister Marafa told us that the redistricting was based on the information contained in the recently completed national census. The problem, Marafa admitted, is that the GRC has yet to make the census results public, leading many to speculate that the information therein shows demographic shifts that do not

favor the CPDM or the politically dominant Beti ethnic group.

Release of the census data would presumably address these concerns, and diplomats are pressing for this to occur. Marafa also expressed to us his intense frustration about the Presidency's failure to release the redistricting decree before convoking the electorate, explaining that MINTAD had submitted it in final in February.

Cameroonian Law Trumped by "Administrative Tolerance"

17. (U) Under Cameroonian law, all political parties must submit their lists of candidates to MINTAD within two weeks of the convocation of the electorate. The Prime Minister, urged on by many, though not all, opposition parties, decided to extend this deadline, saying that a number of national holidays made it impossible for parties to comply with the legal requirement and basing his decision -- widely perceived to be illegal -- on what he termed "administrative tolerance." By many accounts, it was the CPDM -- which had yet to hold primary elections -- that was the most unprepared to meet this deadline. This decision, too, is being challenged in court by the Catholic Church and LEFE.

Politicking and Primaries in the CPDM

18. (U) Against this backdrop of elections preparation, the CPDM has been consumed by primary elections, an unprecedented number of which resulted in the rejection of incumbent Members of Parliament and local officials. In submitting the final list to MINTAD, the CPDM Central Committee, which reviews the candidate lists, decided to overrule some of the primary results. Although the supporters of those removed from the list protested the decision -- in some cases violently -- independent observers welcomed the changes, however irregular or undemocratic, because the individuals removed represented the seedier side of the ruling party (including, for example, Fon Doh of Balikumbat, who was convicted of murder but released on "medical grounds," and another who was arrested in 2006 while trying to flee to Gabon with suitcases of cash). However, at least one opposition party candidate has told us that the conduct of the CPDM nomination process this year was markedly more

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democratic than in previous years.

Are the Elections Dead on Arrival?

19. (C) With the elections just six weeks away, some Western donors already are expressing private cynicism of the GRC's perceived weak commitment to democratic processes. For some, the shortcomings of the registration drive alone are sufficiently serious to make the actual conduct of the elections almost irrelevant. The British High Commissioner, conveying in part the frustration of the Commonwealth, has been particularly outspoken about the inability to look beyond the "failed registration process". Pointing to this aspect, the British High Commissioner reportedly told Marafa: "You can run a perfect election, administratively, and still have a total political catastrophe." Marafa, for his part, takes the criticism in stride and told the Ambassador he still hopes these elections will be Cameroon's "best ever".

Comment

110. (C) We are watching carefully but withholding judgment on these elections until they are over. The process has been messy and flawed, but there is still a lot of excitement

about these elections. For example, women are seeking office in greater numbers and we expect more and more women to cast ballots. Undoubtedly, some problems are inevitable, but the GRC's failure to take even the easy steps (release the census, ease the process and extend the hours for registration) has led many to conclude that its political will to run truly democratic elections is lacking. Nonetheless, we are not prepared to write off these elections, slated to be the last before the next presidential election in 2011. Although the GRC has gotten the process off to a rocky start, there have been some improvements -- such as computerization and sanitation of the electoral rolls, and unprecedented openness in the CPDM primaries. Moreover, concerns about the GRC's organization of the elections are being handled appropriately, via cases presented to the Supreme Court. One leading opposing figure confided that with respect to several irregular actions he supported the government's aim but disapproved of it circumventing the prescribed process to achieve it. Though voter participation is likely to be lower than many hoped for, the Government's organization of the elections and the related court challenges will contribute to Cameroon's democratic maturation. The GRC is also somewhat comforted by their perception in the wake of the April elections in Nigeria that prospects are limited for heavy criticism from groups like the Commonwealth (especially for "mere" legislative/municipal elections that apparently will not attract any non-resident observers). We organized a meeting of western donors on May 31 at which it became clear that the only foreign observers are likely to be those sent by embassies. For our part, we are preparing to send one team of observers to each of the ten provinces, and to coordinate their deployment with other observing diplomatic missions. The French are planning a similar high level of participation, while other, smaller missions will contribute handfuls. End comment.

MARQUARDT